
Class Voice: Fundamental Skills for Lifelong Singing

By Brenda Smith & Ronald Burrichter

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This book alone will not teach the reader how to sing. Rather, the authors, Brenda Smith and Ronald Burrichter, have drawn on years of experience in tertiary voice studio and choral settings to create an auxiliary resource for those studying beginner voice in a group setting, covering topics such as basic singing skills, musicianship, vocal health, identity and lifelong singing. *Class Voice: Fundamental Skills for Lifelong Singing* is “an accessible resource to help beginners master basic singing skills and train them in the presence of others” (pg xi). According to the authors, this book is suitable for any potential voice users, such as music education students or non-music majors, as well as appealing to adult learners in a group setting. Since many educational institutions now offer classes in group vocal instruction with precisely that demographic as its typical enrolment, this book might easily serve as a companion textbook to these classes.

Group vocal instruction has increasingly been adopted by tertiary institutions as a cost-effective means of delivering beginner-level vocal instruction. Several authors advocate specific pedagogical benefits of this model of training (Horn, 2013; Rudus, 2015; Sauerland, 2018; Ware, 2008). In the opening chapter of this book, some of these benefits are articulated, emphasising particularly the positive outcomes of community learning, where others in class can act as “outside eyes and ears” (pg.xiv) in order to provide essential feedback and inspiration. In addition, critical listening skills may be more easily honed in a group setting as students observe the progress of their classmates. The observation of a wide range of approaches and learning styles might also assist the music education student in developing a broad perspective for future lesson planning, as well as benefitting from individualised instruction.

Although the focus of the book is on group learning, several chapters might also prove useful

to individuals in the early stages of a vocal performance degree, as they contain succinct overviews of some of the main considerations in approaching singing and performance. Chapter Four, ‘Skills for Learning to Sing Text’ is an excellent example of this.

The underlying pedagogical premise of the book is that the starting point for all genres is the development of the basics of *bel canto* – non-amplified singing with an emphasis on legato phrasing and beauty of tone throughout the range. For those who disagree with the premise that classical-style training provides the basis for all genres, this book will still be useful in its structure but a teacher may also wish to supplement or replace the included material with exercises and repertoire specific to other genres.

In addition to the book, there is an online companion website containing resources for both teachers and students (with different access codes). These resources include a suggested 16-week course outline, PowerPoint lecture slides, chapter quizzes, discussion questions and additional repertoire suggestions. This is an excellent additional resource, providing direct practical assistance to the teacher wishing to deliver a course modelled on the concepts outlined by the authors.

Throughout this book, there is narrative directed at both the student and the emerging teacher. In this way, it is an incredibly useful resource for those students who aspire to teach, as it provides a constant link between the ‘how’ and the ‘how to teach’. Students are invited to borrow selected concepts and structures in their future lesson planning, and advice is provided on concepts such as pitch modelling for younger singers. Throughout, there is a satisfying balance of theoretical explanation and practical application. Although the book is designed for beginner singers, the authors do not shy away from complex pedagogical terms but instead take the time to

explain them in-text, further providing a comprehensive glossary of common terms as an appendix. The use of illustrations (particularly when talking about posture) is also helpful in providing a better understanding of the concepts introduced. Another impressive aspect of the book is the constant reference to other literature in the field, with suggestions for further reading. In this way, the book provides guided pathways for those students interested in a deeper exploration of the content, without overloading the reader with too much information in the first instance.

The book is divided into ten chapters, with an introduction and conclusion. In addition to main authors Brenda Smith and Ronald Burrichter, there is a significant and valuable presence from contributing authors Robert T. Sataloff (Chapter Two, 'Anatomy and Physiology of the Voice'), Vincent Oakes (Chapter Nine, 'Considerations for the Adolescent Singing Voice') and Erin Nicole Donahue (Chapter Nine, 'Gender Spectrum Voice'; Chapter Ten, 'The Science of Healthy Singing'). The chapters are set out as follows: 1) an overview of the basic singing skills (categorised here as relaxation, posture, breathing and resonance); 2) an impressively concise overview of anatomy and physiology relevant to vocal production; 3) the basics of musicianship, with useful teaching strategies; 4) an overview of the elements of language and an introduction to the International Phonetic Alphabet; 5) the history and acoustic characteristics of solo singing (classical style) including a particularly helpful explanation of range and tessitura; 6) specific consideration for choral and ensemble singing; 7) a step-by-step guide to learning repertoire, including graded warm-up/cooldown exercises and practice strategies; 8) repertoire selection for vocal advancement, with sample repertoire lists; 9) the 'singing life' (more on this below) and 10) vocal health and wellness, including an emphasis on the importance of mental health for optimal vocal performance. Each chapter finishes with a conclusion, discussion questions and suggestions for further reading. In addition, there is a comprehensive glossary containing common vocal pedagogy terms, an index for easy reference and a bibliography with suggestions for further resources such as repertoire sourcing and style guides.

Chapter Nine (The Singing Life) includes sub-sections on considerations for the adolescent singer (written by Vincent Oakes), the female voice, the male voice, and a very welcome chapter on gender diverse voice, written by Erin Nicole Donahue. Each section comprehensively addresses vocal considerations specific to the demographic,

as well as issues of vocal identity and positive psychology in the learning and teaching environment. Curiously, the section on gender diverse voice is written exclusively in the third person, rather than the second-person style of writing that characterises much of the rest of the book. Although this is no doubt due to the fact that this section was contributed by a different author, it seems a missed opportunity for direct inclusion of the gender-diverse student who may be reading this book.

One detracting factor of the book is that since much of it takes an overview, rather than detailed perspective, it is a shame there is little mention of genres or composers outside of European and American Western art music. In today's social and educational climate, a broader perspective might encourage students (and future teachers) to embrace a more diverse and inclusive array of musical experiences in the classroom.

Overall, however, *Class Voice: Fundamental Skills for Lifelong Learning* represents a valuable addition to the resources available for singing and singing teaching; of direct benefit to those engaging in group learning, but also a potentially useful introductory text for singing students in any environment.

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BIOGRAPHY

Shelli Hulcombe is a classical soprano and Lecturer in Voice at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music, Griffith University. She completed performance studies at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music, Griffith University, furthering her studies in the UK at the

Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester. Other qualifications include a Graduate Diploma in Music (Sydney University) and a Master of Music Studies majoring in Vocal Pedagogy (Griffith University).

Shelli has appeared in principal operatic roles and concert performances with many of Australia's leading state orchestras and ensembles, as well as undertaking international engagements in the UK, Europe and South East Asia.

Shelli is a passionate educator of both singers and singing teachers. She served as President for ANATS (The Australian Association of Teachers of Singing) from 2017-2021 and is in demand as an adjudicator and masterclass presenter. Shelli's research interests include the use of cross-genre training to improve vocal outcomes for the classical singer and she is currently completing PhD studies in this area.